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## FROM THE PUPIL'S STANDPOINT

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Much criticism is being made of the English courses that are based on the college requirements. This journal has contained most interesting articles in the past few months reporting various new departures in the subjects and methods of teaching, from study of the current magazines to the writing and acting of plays. I wish to uphold the study of old and tried classics as the best means of arousing both interest and literary feeling.

The best way to answer the question seemed to be to refer to the pupils themselves. My examination has not been as broad as that reported by Dr. C. Edward Jones's *Sources of Interest in High-School English*. It covers four years and two schools, one in New Jersey and one in Connecticut. Pupils have been asked from time to time to write their opinion of their English course and of the particular books studied during the current year, and the following paragraphs embody their answers.

Among the criticisms on the course was that the books read are dry and uninteresting, Burke's *Conciliation* and Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* being quoted as examples. One gave the oft-repeated opinion that pupils dislike the books they have to study in school. In this connection we note that the interest or lack of it was said to depend largely on the teacher. Another said there is too much "reading and study" and not enough discussion, also that the teacher's opinion is insisted on too much. The most thoughtful criticism from any class was that the authors are taken up in too disconnected a manner, the class jumping from Shakespeare to Scott, from Goldsmith to Tennyson in a most bewildering way; a chronological method of treatment with the study of history of literature as a basis was recommended.

So much for the too familiar dark side of the question, which I may say was presented by a small minority of those questioned. Now let us see of what advantage these young people thought their course had been to them.

The majority seemed to think that the study inspired a love of good literature. One reason is that they had to read books they would never have read otherwise. The standard authors were said to be appreciated better when studied in class. One girl put it something like this: "The English course has been a benefit to me, for I should never have read good books by myself. I should not have had anybody to sit by me and explain the hard parts, and so I should have gone on reading dime novels to the end of my days." In this connection many cited the books for supplementary reading, eight of which have to be reported on during the year, as teaching them to like the best. The ability to judge a good book was mentioned as a result of the study of the classics. After learning to like one good book in school, they want to read more by the same author. Some thought the study of history of literature helped toward this end.

Some were very sure that their English course had broadened their minds, and that they had learned concentration and observation. One said: "Literature in Senior year developed my thinking powers." The study and discussion of the great characters in literature helps one to read character—to know human nature. Also the study of the vices and the virtues of the book people benefits the pupil's own character by affording warnings and examples. One girl's account of her intellectual development during her high-school English course—the growth of her appreciation and power of thought—was most interesting and illuminating, but she was unusual both in her maturity of mind and in her power of self-analysis.

Some showed how English helped them in other studies by giving an idea of the customs of different periods, of historical characters, etc. One well said English is the most important study, because it is the basis of all the rest, and while other subjects are frequently forgotten after school is over, the study of literature "continues into life." "English is a culture study." "The English course is most essential if one is to appear well, to talk well, or to understand other studies." "A pupil who thinks it useless shows he needs it."

A very common feeling seemed to be that knowledge of great books helps one in conversation and makes one appear more

intelligent. Composition work received credit for enlarging the vocabulary and giving ease and variety in expression. As one boy put it: "Hereafter we will not make ourselves a bore by using the same phrases all the time." May it be so! Several pupils in each class spoke of the practical benefit of technical grammar, though they thought it dry at the time.

As to the special books read, the consensus of opinion agreed in the main with the tables in Dr. Jones's book, but it may be interesting to quote some of the estimates.

The three novels studied in the course, *Ivanhoe*, *Silas Marner*, and *Tale of Two Cities*, were, of course, specially well liked. *Ivanhoe* is usually the favorite book read in the first year, though I have the record of one division of whom twelve out of thirty-one preferred *Sketch Book*, and only nine *Ivanhoe*. One Senior says when she read it she liked it for the story, but now she remembers the customs and the descriptions. Some pupils say their liking for character study began with *Silas Marner*. I have no figures about *Tale of Two Cities*, though I have reason to believe it is popular. Perhaps the result of a census taken of part of the school as to their favorite author, when Dickens received the most votes, may show that the reading of the book led to the appreciation of its author.

The drama, as represented by Shakespeare, is of course appreciated more by the upper classes, though *Merchant of Venice* seemed to be a favorite with at least one class. *Macbeth* usually receives the preference of the requirements "for study," read in the Senior year. One girl says its study is "a distinct event in my life. I believe I shall always feel a distinct thrill and feel again the power of those impressive scenes when *Macbeth* as a vivid picture comes to my mind." An honest lad says: "It is one of the few books that I should wish to read without forcing myself to it because it was in the English course." When *Hamlet* was read after *Macbeth*, it was enjoyed as well, if not even better.

Poetry is liked by most high-school pupils more for character and story than for the beauty of the lines. When asked why they like—as most of them do—*Vision of Sir Launfal* or *Idylls of the King*, they will generally answer for the story or for the lesson. The lyric does not seem to be appreciated generally at this age. I

find that the *Idylls* is much more of a favorite in our school than in those examined in Dr. Jones's report, but that is doubtless because it is read in the third year instead of the first or second, 43 per cent of one class giving it as first choice of books studied that year. One girl says: "The *Idylls* taught me to love poetry." The author tried selections from the *Faerie Queene* for the first time last year, with varying success, some calling it obscure and dry, and one saying it was "the best thing I ever read in school." But in general it was not as well received as Chaucer. Milton is too elaborate and difficult to be generally popular with our pupils. However, many really appreciate *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. *Comus* is liked for the moral, for the boy or girl of sixteen to eighteen likes to find a lesson in what he reads. That is one reason why he does not care for a merely beautiful lyric. The last year that *Lycidas* was required, I asked the class if they thought it was wise to drop it, and 60 per cent were in favor of retaining it. Here are some of their reasons. "It is good to read one great elegy." "It cannot help but be appreciated, as its style and thought are brought out by such skilful means." "I thought it was quite hard—but for all that it will give us more power next time to think a poem out." "It brings out Milton's greatness as a poet." "It tests the literary taste."

I suppose most English teachers would agree that the essay is the most difficult and least popular form of literature for high-school classes. The general opinion of the pupils tested was to that effect. I should except, however, Irving's *Sketch Book*. It has been noted before that one class preferred it to any other book read the first year. That may be due to the narrative essays, but in one case thirty-three of a class of seventy-five—44 per cent—preferred the descriptive essays. The *De Coverley Papers* claim a rather languid interest on the part of the minority. Carlyle's *Burns* as well as Macaulay's essays seem to be rather beyond the average high-school pupil. Still I wish to quote some favorable opinions on these much maligned works. Carlyle's *Essay on Burns* is one boy's favorite of the books read in the Senior year. "One reason is that whatever Carlyle does or does not do, he keeps you awake. Reading *The Princess* of Tennyson one could take several

naps, but not so with Carlyle. Another reason is that Carlyle treats the personality of his subject so intimately instead of a superficial perusal of facts. Then perhaps there is a certain charm about his rough, forceful epithets and metaphorical fireballs [!] that fascinates me. But the most important point is that he makes you think. He has something to tell you and he makes you listen." Another says: "To read one of Macaulay's books is as beneficial as a course in rhetoric." *Sesame and Lilies*, while every class cannot appreciate it, yet seems to afford real inspiration to the more thoughtful boys and girls. It made them think about things they never thought of before. "It shows one how to read." "The style is so beautiful." "The thought was hard to find, but when found, all the more enjoyable." These were some of the comments. In fact one-third of one class named *Sesame and Lilies* as the most helpful book studied during the year.

Poor Burke comes in for his share of contumely, but had several votaries. "Burke's speech is a book that every high-school student should read." "The book is not only valuable for the thought that it gives, but also for the language and manner of expression." "Burke is like a man who stands on a high eminence and impersonally views the surrounding country first from one point and then from another until he has made a thorough review of the situation." Some who didn't like him gave him credit for giving them training in logical reasoning.

In fact, healthy boys and girls do not want to be given *easy* books to study; they demand strong meat, not milk for babes. They can read and understand the easy books themselves. "What is the use of studying such a book as *Treasure Island*," writes one, "when we can understand it perfectly by simply reading it?" If we leave out the classics, tested by past generations, and spend all our time in studying the magazines or modern literature, when will these young people ever learn to love them, and if they do not, will they not miss something from their lives that they can never replace? I believe in being up to date, and in dealing with present issues, but I believe we can find time for that without cutting out the classics from our curriculum.